

# President Millard Fillmore

Compiled by D. A. Sharpe

President Millard Fillmore (January 7, 1800 – March 8, 1874) is my fourth cousin, four times removed. The ancestors in common between President Fillmore and myself are Dorcas Bronson and her husband, Stephen Hopkins. They are the third great grandparents of President Fillmore, and they are my seventh great grandparents. President Fillmore also is the sixth cousin, three times removed to my wife, Suzanne Margaret Boggess. Their ancestors in common are George Hills and Mary Symonds, the fifth great grandparents of President Fillmore. They also are the eighth great grandparents to Suzanne



Photograph by Matthew Brady, ca. 1855-1865

**Millard Fillmore** was the [13th President of the United States](#) (1850–53), the last to be a member of the [Whig Party](#) while in the [White House](#). A former U.S. Representative from New York, Fillmore was elected the nation's [12th Vice President](#) in 1848, and was elevated to the presidency by the death of [Zachary Taylor](#). He was instrumental in getting the [Compromise of 1850](#) passed, a bargain that led to a brief truce in the battle over [slavery](#). He failed to win the Whig nomination for president in 1852; he gained the endorsement of the [nativist Know Nothing Party](#) four years later, and finished third in [that election](#).

President Millard Fillmore is usually remembered, if at all, for being the butt of innumerable jokes about everything from his supposed lack of accomplishments to his unusual name. In fact, even Fillmore himself appeared aware of his tumble into obscurity. Just a few years removed from the White House, by which time his Whig political party had disintegrated and his strategy for staving off civil war had collapsed, he wrote that the world had forgotten him. Check out 10 illuminating facts about Fillmore's life and legacy.



His Christian faith was as a member of the Unitarian Church. His college education was at the New Hope Academy in a nearby town in 1819. The woman instructing him later became his wife, Abigail Powers (1798-1853) on February 5, 1826. The children they bore were Millard Powers (1828-1889) and Mary Abigail (1832-1854).

He worked on his family's farm under his father's direction, who at age 14 arranged for Millard to apprentice with a cloth-maker in a nearby county. It was said that the work was so grueling that he borrowed \$30 to buy his "freedom," and walked the 100 miles back home. He taught himself to read and write, acquiring reading material however creatively he could.

Fillmore was born into poverty in the [Finger Lakes](#) area of [New York state](#), neat a village named Locke; his parents were tenant farmers during his formative years. He rose from poverty through study, and became a lawyer though he had little formal schooling.

Following his 1819 completion of schooling, he worked as a clerk for a judge in Montville, New York, with whom he studied law. Millard moved his family to Buffalo, New York where he practice law in East Aurora, New York after being admitted to the bar in 1823.

He became prominent in the [Buffalo](#) area as an attorney and politician, was elected to the [New York Assembly](#) in 1828, and to the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) in 1832. Initially, he belonged to the [Anti-Masonic Party](#), but became a Whig as the party formed in the mid-1830s; he was a rival for state party leadership with editor [Thurlow Weed](#) and Weed's protégé, [William H. Seward](#). Through his career, Fillmore declared slavery as an evil, but one beyond the powers of the federal government, whereas Seward was not only openly hostile to slavery, he argued that the federal government had a role to play in ending it. Fillmore was an unsuccessful candidate for [Speaker of the House](#) when the Whigs took control of the chamber in 1841, but was made [Ways and Means Committee](#) chairman. Defeated in bids for the Whig nomination for vice president in 1844, and for New York governor the same year, Fillmore was elected [Comptroller of New York](#) in 1847, the first to hold that post by direct election.

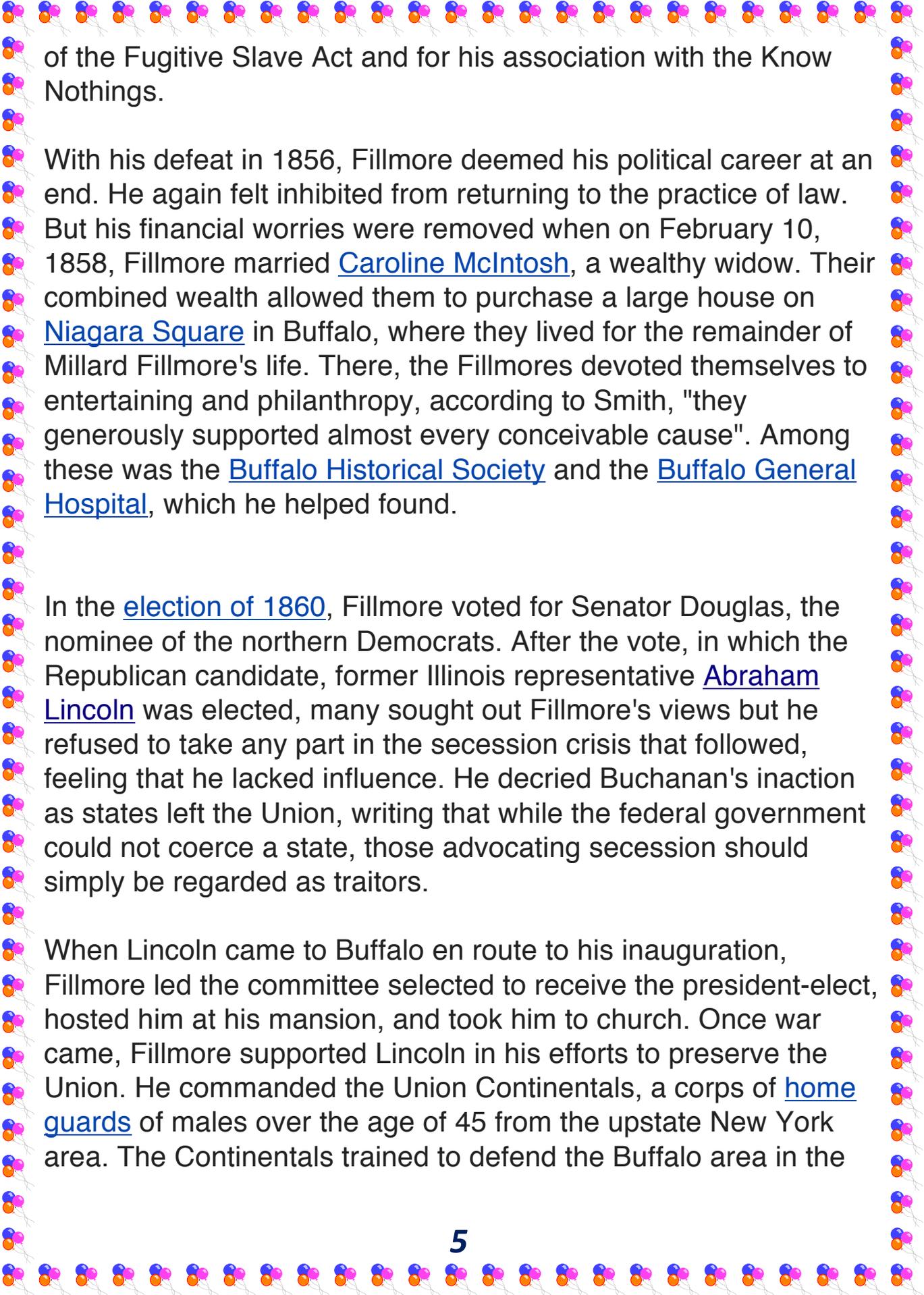
Fillmore received the Whig vice presidential nomination in 1848 as Taylor's running mate, and the two were elected. He was largely ignored by Taylor, including in the dispensing of patronage in New York, on which Taylor consulted Weed and Seward.

As vice president, Fillmore presided over angry debates in the Senate as Congress decided whether to allow slavery in the [Mexican Cession](#). Fillmore supported [Henry Clay](#)'s Omnibus Bill (the basis of the 1850 Compromise) though Taylor did not.

After President Taylor died in July 1850, Fillmore ascended to the office of President. Almost immediately, he dismissed the cabinet and changed the administration's policy. The new president exerted pressure to gain the passage of the Compromise, which gave legislative victories to both North and South, and which was enacted by September.

The [Fugitive Slave Act](#), expediting the return of escaped slaves to those who claimed ownership, was a controversial part of the Compromise, and Fillmore felt himself duty-bound to enforce it, though it damaged his popularity and also the Whig Party, which was torn North from South. In foreign policy, Fillmore supported [U.S. Navy expeditions to open trade in Japan](#), opposed [French](#) designs on Hawaii, and was embarrassed by [Narciso López's](#) filibuster expeditions to Cuba. He sought election to a full term in 1852, but was passed over by the Whigs in favor of [Winfield Scott](#).

As the Whig Party broke up after Fillmore's presidency, many in Fillmore's conservative wing joined the Know Nothings, forming the American Party. In his 1856 candidacy as that party's nominee, Fillmore had little to say about immigration, instead focusing on the preservation of the Union, and won only Maryland. In his retirement, Fillmore was active in many civic endeavors. He helped to found the [University of Buffalo](#), serving as its first chancellor. During the [American Civil War](#), Fillmore denounced secession and agreed that the Union must be maintained by force if necessary, but was critical of the war policies of [Abraham Lincoln](#). After peace was restored, he supported the [Reconstruction](#) policies of President [Andrew Johnson](#). Obscure today, Fillmore has been praised by some for his foreign policy, but he is criticized by others for his enforcement



of the Fugitive Slave Act and for his association with the Know Nothings.

With his defeat in 1856, Fillmore deemed his political career at an end. He again felt inhibited from returning to the practice of law. But his financial worries were removed when on February 10, 1858, Fillmore married [Caroline McIntosh](#), a wealthy widow. Their combined wealth allowed them to purchase a large house on [Niagara Square](#) in Buffalo, where they lived for the remainder of Millard Fillmore's life. There, the Fillmores devoted themselves to entertaining and philanthropy, according to Smith, "they generously supported almost every conceivable cause". Among these was the [Buffalo Historical Society](#) and the [Buffalo General Hospital](#), which he helped found.

In the [election of 1860](#), Fillmore voted for Senator Douglas, the nominee of the northern Democrats. After the vote, in which the Republican candidate, former Illinois representative [Abraham Lincoln](#) was elected, many sought out Fillmore's views but he refused to take any part in the secession crisis that followed, feeling that he lacked influence. He decried Buchanan's inaction as states left the Union, writing that while the federal government could not coerce a state, those advocating secession should simply be regarded as traitors.

When Lincoln came to Buffalo en route to his inauguration, Fillmore led the committee selected to receive the president-elect, hosted him at his mansion, and took him to church. Once war came, Fillmore supported Lincoln in his efforts to preserve the Union. He commanded the Union Continentals, a corps of [home guards](#) of males over the age of 45 from the upstate New York area. The Continentals trained to defend the Buffalo area in the

event of a Confederate attack. They performed military drill and ceremonial functions at parades, funerals, and other events. The Union Continentals guarded Lincoln's funeral train in Buffalo. They continued operations after the war, and Fillmore remained active with them almost until his death.

Despite Fillmore's zeal in the war effort, he was attacked in many newspapers when he gave a speech in early 1864 calling for magnanimity towards the South at war's end, and counting the heavy cost, financial and in blood, of the war.

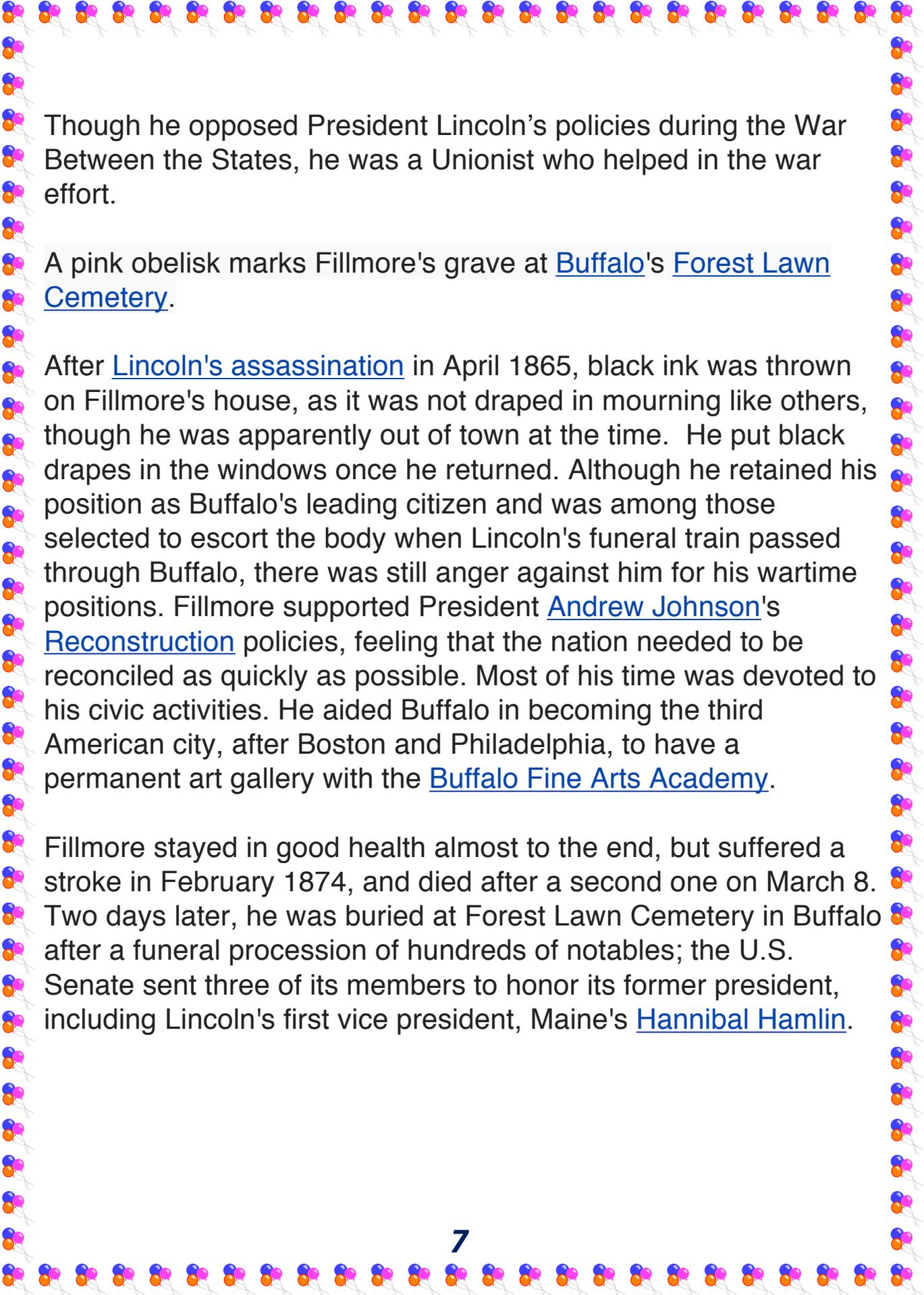
The Lincoln administration saw this as an attack on it, that could not be tolerated in an election year, and Fillmore was called a [Copperhead](#) and even a traitor. This led to lasting ill-feeling against Fillmore in many circles. In the [1864 presidential election](#) Fillmore supported Democratic candidate [George B. McClellan](#) for the presidency, believing that the Democratic Party's plan for immediate cessation of fighting and allowing the seceded states to return with slavery intact was the best possibility for restoring the Union.

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As a former President, he returned to Buffalo, New York and served as Chancellor of the University of Buffalo. His wife, Abigail died in 1853 of pneumonia, and his daughter died of cholera in 1854. Five years later, he remarried in 1858. Their Buffalo mansion was torn down during World War I. Fillmore, Utah was named by Utah Governor Brigham Young in appreciation for Fillmore's making Young the first governor of the new state of Utah. A sculpted statue of Fillmore was erected next to the Buffalo City Hall.

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Though he opposed President Lincoln's policies during the War Between the States, he was a Unionist who helped in the war effort.

A pink obelisk marks Fillmore's grave at [Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery](#).

After [Lincoln's assassination](#) in April 1865, black ink was thrown on Fillmore's house, as it was not draped in mourning like others, though he was apparently out of town at the time. He put black drapes in the windows once he returned. Although he retained his position as Buffalo's leading citizen and was among those selected to escort the body when Lincoln's funeral train passed through Buffalo, there was still anger against him for his wartime positions. Fillmore supported President [Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction](#) policies, feeling that the nation needed to be reconciled as quickly as possible. Most of his time was devoted to his civic activities. He aided Buffalo in becoming the third American city, after Boston and Philadelphia, to have a permanent art gallery with the [Buffalo Fine Arts Academy](#).

Fillmore stayed in good health almost to the end, but suffered a stroke in February 1874, and died after a second one on March 8. Two days later, he was buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo after a funeral procession of hundreds of notables; the U.S. Senate sent three of its members to honor its former president, including Lincoln's first vice president, Maine's [Hannibal Hamlin](#).

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